

Indian Rose Annual - IRA 2017

Frank Kingdon Ward – The man, The rose.

Girija and M.S. (Viru) Viraraghavan

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Let me tell you the story of how this happened.

As you know, Viru has been hybridizing with the rose species, *Rosa gigantea*, and he has registered and released many new hybrids. Some are climbers and some are shrubs. He felt that it would be most appropriate to name some of these new roses after the great plant hunters who first discovered the species in earlier centuries. So, one was named for Sir George Watt, who found *R. gigantea* in 1882, in the Manipur Hills, (north east India) in the Sirohi forest outside Ukhrul town, near the border with Myanmar. Another hybrid was named for General Sir Henry Collett who around the same time – 1882 - found the species in the Shan Hills of Myanmar (then called Burma).

The third, and much later, discoverer of *R. gigantea*, was Frank Kingdon Ward, (1885-1958) the legendary plant hunter of the 20th century.

In fact it could rightly be said that the passing of Frank Kingdon-Ward, towards the end of the '50s of the last century, signaled the close of the great era of plant hunting, which so enriched the gardens of the world.

Kingdon-Ward was born with uncommon advantages – his father was a Professor of Botany in Cambridge University, and he was fortunate in the

great men who sponsored his botanical expeditions. But God had bestowed on him one tremendous handicap – a debilitating fear of heights. Yet he spent his plant collecting life of nearly half a century tramping the most dangerous mountainous areas of the world – the eastern Himalayas and the adjoining mountains of the Burmese triangle, where three nations meet. Plant hunting in this harsh terrain required determination and courage in overcoming natural hazards, as well as unusual flair in selecting the best plants for the world's gardens. We must admire his physical courage, but we must admire even more his conquest of the demons of the mind. In his search for the best specimens of each species he almost invariably re-lived the hazards twice over. He would explore the area in spring to select the best forms of the plants he was looking for, and again in autumn to collect the seeds.

No wonder the plants introduced by him set new standards in plant collection.

Kingdon-Ward was a great romantic. If we look at the titles of some of the books he wrote – 'The Land of the Blue Poppy', 'The Mystery Rivers of Tibet', 'Plant Hunting on the Edge of the World' – we are justifiably thrilled by his love affair with the haunting beauty of the mountains he traversed, and the exaltation of spirit he must have felt in his search for beautiful plants.

His descriptions of the plants he encountered are so intoxicating, we can feel his excitement to this day. His delight at the sighting of the blue poppy, *Meconopsis betanicefolia*, in Tibet, his description of *Rhododendron cerasinum*, which he found in Upper Burma, bearing flowers of brilliant scarlet, with five coal black nectar pouches at the base, as 'coals of fire', and, above all, at least for us, his rapturous description of *Rosa gigantea*, on the slopes of Mount Sirohi, in north east India, as 'climbing the forest trees and bearing great golden globes like golden magnolias, visible from afar', are just a few instances of his ability to evoke the romance of plant hunting.

Here is FK-W's description of finding this rose on the mountainous border between India and Burma:

'One of the most amazing sights was a huge scrambling rose, which sprawled determinedly over the trees in every lane and copse. The largest specimen we saw had what I can only describe as a trunk, as thick as a man's forearm, from which sprang several stems, each more than a hundred feet long and all heavily armed with strong flat prickles... The chubby leaves, still soft and limp, were a deep red; the slim pointed flower buds a pale daffodil yellow; but when the enormous flowers opened, they were ivory white, borne singly all along the arching sprays, each petal faintly engraved with a network of veins like a watermark. The shock of orange-capped stamens made a perfect centrepiece, and the flower distilled a delicate fragrance. What a sight was this great dog rose throughout March, lording it over the thickets, festooning the tallest trees, and hanging from every limb in cascade of scented flowers the size of tea cups... the globose hips look like crab apples. They are yellow with rosy cheeks when ripe.'

(Frank Kingdon-Ward: 'Plant Hunter in Manipur', 1952)

We therefore felt that one of our gigantea hybrid climbers should be named for him. As with the roses named for Watt and Collett, we got in touch with the family, his descendants (the Internet makes it comparatively easy to search and locate families) to ask for permission for the naming. His grandson Oliver Tooley who maintains a website on his grandfather, www.french4tots.co.uk/kingdon-ward/fkw-biog.html, readily agreed to have a rose named for his illustrious forebear. The rose was registered in 2012 with the International Rose Registration Authority.

In 2014, we read a letter written by a Matthew Biggs in the Royal Horticultural Society (R.H.S., of which society we have been members for decades) journal, 'The Garden' where he bemoaned the fact that while politicians and other similar people have their graves kept in immaculate condition, plant hunters who have risked life and limb in order to bring new species of plants into the gardening world, are sadly forgotten. And he mentioned visiting the churchyard in Grantchester, where Kingdon Ward lies buried. (Actually a casket containing his ashes, is buried, and there is a headstone marking the place).

Reading the letter we had an inspiration. Would it not be befitting and appropriate if somehow we could have the rose we had named for Kingdon Ward planted near his grave?

We wrote to the RHS, who put us in touch with Matthew Biggs. We did not know that he was a well known and popular horticultural author and television broadcaster, for BBC Radio 4. Matthew was immediately taken with our idea and agreed to start the ball rolling. We contacted grandson Oliver too, as it would require everyone's help to persuade the Parochial Church Council of Grantchester to agree to this unusual request. It took sometime, and much correspondence, but they very graciously agreed and a good warm south facing church wall, near the grave was decided upon for receiving the rose.

Next we had to send the plant material to England. Michael Marriott, of David Austin Roses (English Roses) who is our good friend, happened to know Michael Biggs too. He readily agreed to our request to propagate the rose. So, with all the proper documentation, the bud-wood was dispatched.

As Matthew said 'The rose is not available in England, so the only solution was for me to find a rose nursery in England to propagate the rose (fortunately, these communications took place in August, the correct time of year for rose propagation). After several hurried phone calls to people I knew, Michael at David Austin Roses said 'yes', and budwood was immediately flown to Britain. The first batch died in the chill of the aircraft hold, the second delivery was OK and sixteen 'Frank Kingdon Ward' roses are now growing at David Austin's Rose Nursery in Shropshire.'

By February this year (2016) the plants had grown and were ready to be planted. Matthew Biggs was masterminding the entire project. He had to find a date which suited the church authorities, and the Kingdon Ward family.

Invitations were sent out:

Grantchester Parochial Church Council
has much pleasure in inviting you to
THE PLANTING OF THE KINGDON-WARD ROSE
by Matthew Biggs from BBC Radio 4's
'Gardeners Question Time'
on **10th February 2016**
at **11.00am**

in the Churchyard, followed by a glass of wine
in the Church. If you would like to attend, **please RSVP** to
caroburkitt@gmail.com by **6th February 2016**

Michael Marriott and other well known names in the rose world, like Peter Harkness and Robert Mattock, Maurice Foster the distinguished plantsman, and the National Trust Head Gardeners from various gardens associated with Kingdon Ward and other rose historians took the trouble to travel on a cold wintry morning to grace the occasion.

Kingdon Ward's 90 year old daughter, Pleoine, (through his first wife, Florinda) and her children, including Oliver Tooley, and their children, making 3 generations of the family, were at the ceremony.

Also present was the niece of Ward's second wife, Jean, nee Macklin (The *Lilium macklinii*, found also in Sirohi, when *R. gigantea* was discovered, is named for her, as she was with him on that trip. After Kingdon Ward's death in 1958 she married Albert Rasmussen, a Norwegian botanist, but she kept in touch with Oliver Tooley, Frank's grandson. She died in 2011 aged 90.). Many of our friends and, on our behalf, a niece and husband who teach in Cambridge University, were there.

It was a beautiful occasion. Oliver gave a moving eulogy, Maurice Foster had agreed to read our citation, and others spoke about the great plant explorer. Jean Macklin's ashes, kept in an urn, had been brought by

her niece, and they were scattered in the pit dug for the rose, and then the rose was planted. Finally Frank and Jean were together.

The Grantchester Church Council had done the occasion proud and everyone who attended said, and wrote to us, that it was a most memorable and moving event.

Matthew wrote to us that never before had he been part of such an emotionally inspiring function. *'It has been a lovely story and a fascinating day. I am still blown away by the whole thing, even more moving was that Frank and Jean have been reunited at last, which is lovely.'*

As we concluded in the citation we wrote, and which Maurice Foster read out:

'While writing these few words on Kingdon-Ward, surrounded by hundreds of blooms of Rosa gigantea in our garden, which we collected from the same slopes of Mount Sirohi, where he found the rose, we wonder how the gardeners of the world can ever repay the debt they owe to this great plant hunter. Naming, and planting a hybrid gigantea rose, in his memory, is our simple tribute to him. We feel that the grave of Kingdon-Ward could be described in the spirit of Rupert Brooke's 'The Soldier', as a corner of an English field which is forever the Himalayas.'

Matthew Biggs is keen, as we are, that more 'Frank Kingdon Ward' rose plants should be planted in gardens associated with him -- Christ Church College, where Frank studied and Cambridge Botanic Gardens, Borde Hill in West Sussex, Mount Stewart Garden in Ireland and Mottisfont, in Hampshire.

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The next step has been taken. Michael Marriott is kindly propagating more plants of this rose and they will be distributed across the UK to gardens which have an association with the intrepid and amazing plant collector of yesteryear.

Now to the details of the rose. It is a hybrid gigantea climber, perhaps not as vigorous as 'Sir George Watt' and 'Sir Henry Collett'. It is a cross between the French Hybrid Tea rose 'Carmosine' and *R. gigantea*. It has large flowers with beautiful form and creamy yellow stained pink flowers, very eye-catching when the blooms can be seen up a pergola or tree.

Copies of the original

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(Pictures on Page 172)

"Some people grumble that roses have thorns; I am grateful that thorns have roses."

— Alphonse Karr, *A Tour Round My Garden*

"It seems strange that my life should end in such a terrible place, but for three years I had roses, and apologized to no one."

— Alan Moore, *V for Vendetta*

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Frank Kingdon Ward,
a Climbing Hybrid Gigantea



Headstone of Frank Kingdon Ward's
Grave in Grantchester Church



Planting of the Rose



The Attendees at the Ceremony